

Passage to Islamabad

424-7000

By Ron Dorfman

Some Boston University professors and graduate students are scheduled to be in Pakistan this month teaching Afghan refugees media skills so they can better report the Soviet invasion of their country and the resistance to it; the more skillfully produced reports, it is hoped, will lead to increased awareness of the conflict, especially in the Third World.

The taking on of this project led to a nasty faculty wrangle and the resignation of the dean of BU's College of Communications. The reason can be discerned if one describes the project in harsher but still accurate terms: BU journalism professors, under contract to the U.S. government, are helping the Afghan resistance refine its propaganda to make it more salable in international media markets.

"Labeling is very important," observes Everett E. Dennis, director of the Gannett Center for Media Studies at Columbia University.

Bernice Buresh, a BU journalism professor and a former *Newsweek* correspondent and bureau chief, said the project sets a bad example for students. "The college contains three schools," she noted. "If the public-relations program in the School of Mass Communication and Public Relations wanted to apply for this grant and do this kind of work, it wouldn't compromise the college. But the people who are doing it say they're doing it as a journalistic project. And those of us who object say, 'It's propaganda, and you're jeopardizing our credibility.' It also sends a bad message to our students: One day you can do propaganda, and the next day you can do journalism. Some things you can't do even though they may be worthy things to do."

Jon N. Westling, the university's provost, said it's not true that the project involves propaganda. "The guidelines are public guidelines," he said. "They're very clear that the training component is simply that: to take a group of students, who have one great advantage that no Western journalist has, and provide those individuals with some basic skills in newswriting, photography, and so on to enable them to provide more information and more accurate information on what's going on inside Afghanistan."

"I find it ironic that some people refer

to this as media management, since there is a highly successful media-management operation by the Russian government, which has imposed a news blackout on the war in Afghanistan. . . . I would hope that this project will contribute something to the circumvention of that highly offensive but highly effective form of media management that the Soviet government has imposed."

The Afghan media project was inspired by an ad hoc bipartisan congressional committee on Afghanistan headed by Senator Gordon J. Humphrey, a New Hampshire Republican who recently told the Associated Press: "If we train freedom fighters in the use of cameras to bring out footage, that might help raise international public outrage. It's propaganda in the best sense of the word."

Last year, Congress voted a special appropriation of \$500,000 that the United States Information Agency was to use to pay a contractor to do the training and to help set up an independent Afghan news agency. But first John O. Koehler, the then-recently retired managing director of AP's World Services division, was engaged to do a feasibility study. Koehler said he reported to the congressional committee, the National Security Council, and the USIA.

The problem to be addressed was the paucity of news coming out of the Afghan battlefields. Because of official restrictions on the Soviet side and the difficult terrain and lack of communications on the resistance side, Western correspondents have been able to cover the war only sporadically. Afghans have greater access but lack reportorial skills. "There are practically no such animals as journalists among them, at least none that I could find," Koehler said.

The solution was to train some of the Afghan *mujaheddin* in "basic police observation techniques," he said. "They've had problems with things like vehicle identification and [exaggerating] the number of people involved in something, and they've hurt their credibility." On the basis of his experience at AP with training programs for Third World journalists, Koehler dismissed the possibility of bringing people out of the refugee camps to a "totally alien" environment for "training that would be totally irrelevant to their situation at

home."

Koehler said the objective was unpretentious: "It was basically to train them to be accurate, not to be great writers." At the same time, other young men would be trained as cameramen, "so they could get confirming pictures." They would produce a brief weekly roundup, perhaps 1,000 words, for worldwide distribution and would be available to brief and assist foreign correspondents.

On the basis of Koehler's report, the USIA published a request for proposals and received 23 of them, including a "concept paper" from Boston University's College of Communication. The paper was developed by a group of faculty members led by H. Joachim Maitre, professor of journalism and international relations, a military-affairs writer and senior editor of the Axel Springer publishing house in Germany. It was approved by Dean Bernard S. Redmont, a veteran of 40 years as a correspondent for major print and broadcast media in Europe, Latin America and the Soviet Union.

The paper called for a somewhat more ambitious training program that would take place on the Boston campus. BU was among five finalists selected by the USIA to submit formal proposals. But the agency specified that the training be done in the refugee center at Peshawar, about 25 miles across the Khyber Pass from Afghanistan. Dean Redmont decided that Peshawar represented a less than ideal academic environment and withdrew the college's approval for the project.

Maitre and Associate Dean Ronald S. Goldman, however, worked with Jon Westling, the provost, to draft a new proposal that circumvented Redmont administratively and was submitted to President John R. Silber. Silber, generally reputed to be an autocrat, split the difference on this one: He recommended that the university submit two proposals to the USIA — one for training in Boston, under College of Communication auspices; the other for training on-site, under general university auspices.

Ten senior members of the communication faculty, mostly from the school of journalism, signed a letter to Westling urging that the university make an effort to convince the USIA that it would be better for all concerned if the

project were based in Boston. Among other things, they said:

"... a program conducted in Peshawar could not be satisfactorily administered, would be open to infiltration and surveillance by agents of the KGB, the Iranian government, and other governments hostile to the United States, and would pose serious risks to the reputation of the university and the college. The gravest risk is that the program would be seen by the outside world and by the American academic community as not an educational enterprise at all but as a venture in propaganda and counterintelligence."

(One of the signers, William V. Shannon, a journalism professor, former member of the editorial board of *The New York Times* and former ambassador to Ireland, said recently that another consideration was the possibility of CIA involvement. The CIA finances and supplies the Afghan resistance. Shannon, who said he has "no problems" with the project in its current incarnation, said some faculty members "think that we should stay very far away from any dealings with intelligence agencies.")

Westling replied that, all things being equal, he, and President Silber as well, would prefer to have the program on campus but that it was clear that the USIA had another agenda. He argued that for Americans, Peshawar is probably safer than Boston; that BU has thousands of international students and operates a number of programs in Third World countries, all of which are inescapably vulnerable to the kind of manipulation and misrepresentation the letter writers feared; and that the writers were really advocating doing nothing, "[making] the best the enemy of the good."

There was something else at issue, too, Westling noted pointedly. He said he hoped the USIA would accept one or the other of BU's proposals because "the future of the College of Communication will depend, in no small measure, on a more successful effort than in the past to attract external support for educational, research and training activities that the college needs to enrich its academic program and advance its reputation." He concluded:

"I am grateful for your interest in this matter and trust that it signals an

increased interest among the faculty of the College of Communication in grant and contract activity."

A few weeks later, Redmont fired Associate Dean Goldman, apparently for insubordination. (Goldman holds no academic appointment.)

All of that was last fall. In the spring, the USIA notified President Silber that BU's proposal for on-site training had been accepted but that the part of the program that dealt with setting up an Afghan news agency would be assigned to King Features/Hearst Metrotone News. BU would get \$180,364; Hearst would get \$309,636.

On March 26, two weeks after a stormy meeting of the College of Communication faculty, David Klatell, director of the school of journalism, announced he was resigning as director immediately, rather than at the end of the school year as scheduled. Klatell has had long-term health problems and explained that "recently the stress and strain of performing my duties have greatly affected my health."

And on July 7, Dean Redmont

The local angle

Main Street America and The Third World

by John Maxwell Hamilton

Foreword by Peter Jennings

With contributions from *The (Aurora, Ill.) Beacon-News*, *The Bristol (Conn.) Press*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, *The Dallas Morning News*, *The Hattiesburg (Miss.) American*, *The (Hopewell, Va.) News*, *The (Everett, Wash.) Herald*, *The Knoxville News-Sentinel*, *The La Crosse (Wis.) Tribune*, *The Middletown (N.Y.) Times Herald-Record*, *The Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *The Tulsa Tribune*, and *WSAZ-TV*, Huntington, W. Va.

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resigned, "for reasons with which you [President Silber] are familiar." (He got a consolation fall-semester sabbatical in London as adviser to the college's internship program, then returns to the teaching faculty.) Redmont's resignation was played big in *The Boston Globe*, and the story was picked up around the country.

A month later, Silber appointed Joachim Maitre interim dean, and Maitre promptly restored Ronald Goldman as associate dean.

Maitre, asked whether the rather small sum involved (BU has upward of \$70 million in grants and contracts) was worth all the academic bloodshed, said: "At first glance, the answer would be, 'Obviously, it's not worth it.' But I don't really see the bloodletting. Nobody's lost a job. And we have achieved national fame, or infamy."

As it turns out, the Afghan media project will not take place in Peshawar. The government of Pakistan — for reasons which its embassy in Washington could not or would not explain to *The QUILL* but which a BU dean said had to do with the delicacy of its relations with Afghanistan and the Soviet Union — was not enthusiastic about the project. At one point, there was speculation that the project might have to be removed to BU's outpost campus in Germany. But by September, the parties

had agreed to a headquarters in Islamabad, 100 miles east of Peshawar. There, at least, a communications infrastructure was already in place.


Maitre said there would be 20 trainees in the first of two six-week sessions, many of whom had been abroad for periods of a year or more learning TV camera technique in Czechoslovakia, East Germany and Holland. Some, he said, had worked professionally in Kabul before joining the resistance, but "their view of presenting a video is old-fashioned — they tend to do 30- to 45-minute documentary-style pieces. The quick, news-style three- to five-minute piece is virtually unknown."

Trainees will be coached in balancing their reports to appeal to foreign editors and audiences. "Nobody wants to see 150 Afghans sitting on top of a captured Soviet tank," Maitre said he told the *mujaheddin* leaders. "We've seen that too often. But: How are children schooled in the unoccupied parts of Afghanistan? That's the sort of story they should be doing." No more than 20 percent of the product should be combat reporting, Maitre said.

Maitre may have a tough time convincing them of that. David Klein of, Impact Features in San Francisco, whose stories from Afghanistan have appeared on network news shows, said that the USIA's project was "doomed to failure."

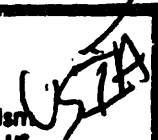
Klein taught his Afghan friends to use video cameras and tried to teach them to do credible journalism. But, he said, "you run up against the tremendously ideological approach of the Afghans; they just don't understand the notion of 'warts and all' — the idea that if you show their society as it really is, people will be more sympathetic."

The primary target market for the Afghan reports is the Third World, though Charles Shurt, general manager of Hearst Metrotone News, said he hopes to get the European Broadcasting Union to subscribe and distribute the file to its affiliates, which would help pay for satellite distribution. Maitre said the Arab countries also have indicated some interest. Uplink costs out of Pakistan run \$2,000 for 10 minutes, Shurt said.

Interestingly, any USIA subsidy would make distribution of the Afghan reports in the United States illegal under the Smith-Mundt Act, which prohibits domestic dissemination of USIA materials. The mere fact that the project is being organized on behalf of the USIA arguably makes the reports *propaganda* in the United States no matter who is paying for production and distribution, according to a knowledgeable congressional source. 

Ron Dorfman, former editor of *The Quill*, is a free-lance writer and media critic.

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